

Fighter jet accidentally drops dummy bomb near hiker

BY TOM BOWMAN
Of The Patriot-News

FORT INDIANTOWN GAP • A Thunderbolt jet fighter accidentally dropped a 25-pound cast-iron practice bomb on a hiking trail north of the Gap, prompting military officials to ground the plane while they investigate.

No one was injured in the Oct. 13 accident, said Gap spokesman Col. Chris Cleaver, but the nonexplosive bomb, often called a dummy bomb,

fell near a hiker who reported it to the state Game Commission.

The bomb fell in the Lebanon County part of the 18-mile abandoned rail trail that runs through state game land from Dauphin in Dauphin County to High Bridge Dam in Schuylkill County.

"The two Thunderbolts had been in the air quite a while," the hiker said in an e-mail to the game commission. "I was heading east on the rail trail . . . when I heard the impact. It took a while for me to realize what

had occurred. Couldn't believe it! Retraced my steps. Still couldn't believe it! Never thought for a moment that I would find the impact area on the rail trail."

The Game Commission released the e-mail to The Patriot-News but would not identify the hiker. Jerry Feaser, a spokesman for the commission, also would not release two pictures of the dummy bomb that the hiker sent to the commission.

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MASTER SGT. MARK BUCHER, Air Force

An A-10 Thunderbolt II like this one accidentally dropped a dummy bomb on a hiking trail near Fort Indiantown Gap on Oct. 13.

BOMB: Practice projectile lands near hiker

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Feaser described the bomb crater as six inches in diameter and looking like a groundhog hole. The bomb was underground and could not be seen.

Cleaver said the plane that dropped the bomb was an A-10 jet.

"They had six bombs on board," he said. "This was the fifth pass, one bomb per pass, flying east at 10,000 feet," Cleaver said. The pilot "pushed the release on the bomb — everything's normal — and he turns left. That's part of the tactic. [Something] caused that bomb to hang and it dropped and landed on the rails to trails."

The bomb landed more than a mile north of the target, Cleaver said.

"Obviously, that's a concern. That's a significant concern on all fronts," Cleaver said. "All military aircraft used in war, as they are in Iraq today, a bomb that hangs and would cause it to go off-target, is a tremendous safety concern for friendly troops."

"Whether it's in peace time training environment or on the front lines of war, when you have a bomb that hangs up, that is a significant safety concern," he said.

Cleaver said the incident has nothing to do with the state National Guard seeking 2,100 acres of Pennsylvania Game Commission land on the north side of Second Mountain to Fort Indiantown Gap. That land would act as a buffer zone for projectiles from 120 mm guns on M-1



CHRIS KNIGHT, The Patriot-News

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Col. Chris Cleaver, Fort Indiantown Gap

tanks on a range that has not been built.

Raymond Swingholm, a retired Annville-Cleona biology teacher who is a member of the Lebanon Valley Hiking Club, said he and other members often hike the trail where the bomb fell.

"It did that before," Swing-

holm said of the errant bomb. "This is not the first time."

In 1997, the Gap's old tank range was closed when rounds from tank guns ricocheted over the top of Second Mountain into state game lands. Tank rounds fell close to a fly fisherman and several tank rounds were found near the rail trail.

Swingholm, a World War II veteran who flew 64 missions over Europe in a B-25 bomber, said he is not worried about bombs hitting along the trail.

"I went through hell over in World War II," the Annville resident said. "It doesn't bother me."

But Swingholm said some hikers worry that the land swap with the Gap would increase the possibility of accidents.

"They said we can continue to hike, but we're afraid that the shells might come flying over," Swingholm said of the proposed M-1 tank range. "That's a worry."

The Thunderbolt A-10 that dropped the bomb flew in the first Gulf War, Cleaver said. The jet is assigned to the 111th Fighter Wing at Willow Grove Naval Air Station. Guard officials ruled out pilot error in the accident and said the pilot who dropped the bomb had more than 2,800 flight hours.

The National Guard bombing range at the Gap is one of 15 in the United States. Planes dropped their first bombs there in 1979. About 2,500 planes use the range each year.

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